



Howell Living History Farm

Pleasant Valley in the American Revolution

The First Hunterdon County Militia Regiment

Four militia regiments were created in Hunterdon County under the militia law of June 1775 and the First Regiment was made up of men from Hopewell Township, Maidenhead (now Lawrence Township), and Trenton Township (now the city of Trenton and Ewing Township). All of these areas are now part of Mercer County which was formed in 1838. During the Revolution, Trenton was the county seat of Hunterdon County, but was not the state capital as it is today. Virtually everyone in Pleasant Valley was connected to the First Hunterdon Militia Regiment through members of their extended families and friendship circles who served in it.

The First Hunterdon consisted initially of seven infantry companies. Three companies were formed in Hopewell Township, two in Maidenhead, and two in Trenton Township. Early in the war an artillery company and a light horse troop were formed. Since each county was allowed just one artillery company and one light horse troop these units were for Hunterdon County as a whole, but the captains and most of the other officers and privates came from the First Hunterdon.

The story of the First Hunterdon began shortly after the events of April 1775 when fighting broke out between militiamen and British regulars in Massachusetts. Patriots in New Jersey began forming minuteman and other militia companies as a way of showing solidarity with the people of Massachusetts and preparing for possible confrontations with the British regulars. On June 3, 1775 the Provincial Congress of New Jersey passed the first Militia Law in an attempt to regulate these companies as well as take over the colonial militia organization from William Franklin, the Royal Governor of New Jersey. This initial law was modified on several occasions during the war. Several parts of the militia law bear looking at to better understand the culture of the First Hunterdon militia experienced by the families of Pleasant Valley.

Companies were formed geographically by township and company officers (captains, lieutenants, and ensigns) were elected by the soldiers of the company and then commissioned by the state. Company officers initially chose the regimental officers (Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel, Adjutant, and Major) who were commissioned by the state. Later the state played a more direct role in naming regimental officers. Company officers also chose the sergeants, corporals, and musicians for the company. Soldiers were required to supply their own equipment, including: a musket (firelock) with steel ramrod and bayonet, a priming wire and brush to clean the musket firing mechanism, 12 flints, a cartridge box for 23 rounds, a tomahawk or sword, and a haversack or pack. Fines could be levied on soldiers who did not show up for drill or service with a complete set of equipment and the money from the fines was often used to obtain pieces of equipment for men who did not have the means to supply their own.

In general, each militia unit was divided into “classes” which could be called out for active duty on a rotating basis – usually every other month. A major element of the militia law in all of its versions was that while service was considered mandatory there were recognized ways to avoid service. Some men were exempted for periods of time due to their occupation – often because they were producing weapons or equipment for the army. Men could obtain substitutes who either volunteered or were paid. A son might substitute for his father and serve both his own alternate months and those of his father. Masters might have their apprentices substitute for them. Some men found their own substitutes and paid them, while others gave their captain the money and asked the captain to get them a substitute. Some men didn’t want to know who their substitute was. Since the only punishment for men

who did not show up for duty was a fine, some men chose to simply pay the fine rather than serve for one or more call ups. This obviously favored the older, more established men or ones of greater means. There were also religious – conscientious objector - exemptions, such as for Quakers, who might be required to help the cause in some other way.

In the first year of the war a number of men joined the Continental Army for a one-year enlistment and took part in the invasion of Canada that ended in failure and retreat. Most men, however, served alternate months in the First Hunterdon. When the British left Boston in 1776 and New York became their known ultimate destination, men from the First Hunterdon were recruited or drafted into a regiment of state troops with a five-month enlistment and sent to New York to assist the Continentals. Those men who remained in the First Hunterdon spent alternating months going to the towns of Elizabeth Town, Woodbridge, and Perth Amboy to guard against British incursions into New Jersey from Staten Island. The men who joined the state levies participated in the battles of Long Island and White Plains. The future Colonel of the First Hunterdon, Joseph Phillips of Maidenhead, distinguished himself in these actions as did several other officers and men from the First Hunterdon region. The five-month men retreated with Gen. Washington and the Continentals across New Jersey and were joined by units of the First Hunterdon militia retreating from their posts opposite Staten Island. The enlistments of the levies and the militiamen expired during the retreat and since the army was heading directly for the home area of the First Hunterdon with the British in hot pursuit, most of the men left the army when their time expired and went to look after their families. However, once they had done what they could for their families many rejoined their companies in the First Hunterdon and many assisted the Continentals in crossing the Delaware to Pennsylvania at Trenton and then participated in a number of ways in the events leading up to and including the battles of Trenton and Princeton.

After Trenton and Princeton the regiment went through some reorganization that established a structure that would endure to the end of the war. The men continued to serve alternate month tours at the posts facing Staten Island and some men served at engagements such as at Van Nest's Mills in Somerset County. When the British army in Philadelphia left the city to head for New York across New Jersey, the First Hunterdon participated in the efforts to slow and harass the British on the march that would eventually lead to the Battle of Monmouth. The American Army moved out of Valley Forge and crossed the Delaware at Coryell's Ferry – now Lambertville – and members of the First Hunterdon acted as guides bringing the army to what is today the borough of Hopewell where Gen. Washington held his council of war just before the Battle of Monmouth. Many members of the First Hunterdon participated in the Battle of Monmouth either in the active fighting or in reserve or supporting roles guarding supplies or road intersections.

Again, after Monmouth the First Hunterdon continued service guarding against incursions from Staten Island and in June 1780 participated in the battles near Springfield when British troops came across into New Jersey. Since the British continued to occupy New York City throughout the rest of the war, the First Hunterdon continued its service opposite Staten Island. In January 1781 the regiment was called out to go to Princeton when the Pennsylvania Continental Line mutinied.

During the last few years of the war there were no major actions in New Jersey. While major activity had moved to the southern colonies there was still need to support the Continentals and many men from the First Hunterdon were either drafted or volunteered to be teamsters – supplying their own teams and wagons – to transport army supplies to various posts.

Howell Farm is a facility of the Mercer County Park Commission
Brian M. Hughes, County Executive Kevin B. Bannon, Executive Director

